DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 203 SO 022 279

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TITLE William Heard Kilpatrick (1871-1965): Philosopher of Progressive Education and Teacher of Teachers.
PUB DATE 24 Jan 92
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Biographies; Educational History; Educational Theories; *Progressive Education; *Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Kilpatrick (William Heard)

ABSTRACT

This paper is a brief biographical sketch of William Heard Kilpatrick who was a leading advocate of progressive education. A 22-item bibliographical essay is included. (DB)

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by
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January 24, 1992

William Heard Kilpatrick (1871-1965), Philosopher of Progressive Education and Teacher of Teachers

By Franklin Parker

William Heard Kilpatrick was born in White Plains, GA, son of James Hines Kilpatrick, a Southern Baptist minister, and Edna Perrin Heard, a teacher. He had an orthodox upbringing and did well in school. In 1888 he entered the sophomore class at Mercer University (Baptist, Macon, GA), excelled in mathematics, and earned the B.A. degree in 1891. A Mercer trustee encouraged him to study mathematics and physics at Johns Hopkins University, 1891-92. There he was transported from a conservative rural atmosphere to a liberal community of inquiring scholars. Mercer granted him the M.A. degree in 1892 for his Johns Hopkins graduate study. Because of administrative changes, he did not get a hoped-for Mercer teaching job.

His first teaching post at Blakely Institute, a combined elementary and secondary public school in southwest Georgia, required that he attend a July 1892 summer session at Rock College Normal School, Athens, GA. There he learned of the educational theories of German educator Friedrich Froebel, kindergarten founder and learning-through-play advocate (Kilpatrick later wrote Froebel's Kindergarten Principles Critically Examined, New York: Macmillan, 1916); and of Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who urged teaching by encouragement without harsh discipline. He was impressed by Education Professor Otis Ashmore, who told of the interest stimulated among his students at Chatham Academy, Savannah, GA, so that they studied without supervision in his absence. Ashmore's example, Kilpatrick later wrote, was the origin for his 1918 project method article. At an April 8, 1893, Chautauqua tent meeting at nearby Albany, GA, he heard visiting Cook County (IL) Normal School director and progressive educator Francis Wayland Parker. He then read Leila E. Patridge, The "Quincy Method" Illustrated (New York: E.L. Kellogg, 1885), describing Parker's successful progressive education methods used while he was Quincy, MA, school superintendent. He taught mathematics in the eighth, ninth, and tenth grades at Blakely and was co-principal, 1892-95. There he first experimented with nontraditional teaching and administration.

He again studied at Johns Hopkins University, summer 1895; then taught seventh grade in the Savannah, GA, public schools, 1896-97. He also studied at the University of Chicago under John Dewey, summer 1898, later noting that he was not initially impressed by Dewey. He was at Mercer University, 1897-1906, taught mathematics, was vice president, 1900, and acting president, 1904-06, but resigned when the trustees were concerned about his doubting the virgin birth. Summer sessions he attended while at Mercer University included Cornell University,

summer 1900, under Charles de Garmo, disciple of Johann Friedrich Herbart, and a Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored summer school for teachers, Knoxville, TN, where he heard psychologist G. Stanley Hall. He taught in Columbus, OH, in 1906-07 before enrolling as a student at Teachers College, Columbia University (TCCU), in 1907.

Dean James Earl Russell had merged progressivism and professionalism to make TCCU a leading U.S. teacher education center. Kilpatrick studied under Dewey, who had left Chicago for Columbia University in 1904, Paul Monroe, major U.S. educational historian, E. L. Thorndike, and others. He impressed Monroe in a class paper documenting the beginning of Dutch schools in New Amsterdam (New York) in 1638, not 1633, as previously believed. Teaching history of education part time, he began a dissertation on Benedict Spinoza, found insufficient material, returned to the origin of Dutch schools, and completed his dissertation in 1911 (Monroe helped get it published by the Department of the Interior as The Dutch Schools of New Netherland and Colonial New York, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912).

In 1908 Kilpatrick wrote in his diary, "Professor Dewey has made a great difference in my thinking." Dewey wrote to Professor John A. MacVannel, Kilpatrick's major professor, "He is the best I ever had." Kilpatrick spent the rest of his professional career and long life at TCCU where he was a student, 1907-09; received the Ph.D. in 1912, was lecturer in education, 1909-11; assistant professor, 1911-15; associate professor, 1915-18; professor of philosophy of education, 1918-37; and thereafter emeritus professor.

Kilpatrick was catapulted to fame by his 1918 article, "The Project Method," Teachers College Record, 19 (September 1918), pp. 319-335. By "project" Kilpatrick meant any purposeful learning activity which the student wanted to do wholeheartedly. This active, interest-motivated, and life-like activity was seized upon by progressive teachers as a useful curriculum device. Course content was divided into units or projects students could complete alone or in small groups under teacher guidance. The project method, seen as a welcome antidote to traditional education, gave Dewey's child-centered education a practical teaching methodology and was a paradigm shift from subject- and teacher-based education to child-centered education. It was popular in progressive elementary schools in the 1930s and was revived in the open classroom atmosphere of the late 1960s.

Kilpatrick commanded attention at TCCU by his courtly manner, erect stature, and lion-like mane of silvery white hair. He attracted students by using small group discussions. With notable skill he divided educational problems among small groups in a large class, each group discussed a specific problem, a group chair reported findings to the large class (numbering in the hundreds), followed by discussion and debate. His success in this procedure earned for him the title of the "Million Dollar Professor," which came from the headline of a New York Post article (March 6, 1937) by David Davidson, estimating that his 35,000 graduate students paid over a million dollars in tuition fees to TCCU before he retired in 1937.

He married Marie Beman Guyton (they had three children) on December 27, 1898 (she died May 1907); he then married Margaret Manigault Pinckney on November 26, 1908 (she died November 1938); and finally married Marion Y. Ostrander on May 8, 1940 (she had been his secretary).

He taught summers at the University of Georgia, 1906, 1908, and 1909; the University of the South (Knoxville), 1907; was visiting professor, Northwestern University, 1937-38, and taught summer sessions there, 1939, 1940, 1941; taught summer sessions, Stanford University, 1938; University of Kentucky, 1942; University of North Carolina, 1942; and University of Minnesota, 1946. His trips abroad included school visits, lectures, and meetings with prominent educators in Italy, Switzerland, and France, May-June 1912; Europe and Asia, August 1926-June 1927; and round the world, August-December 1929.

He received honorary LL.D. degrees from Mercer University, 1926; Columbia University, 1929; and Bennington College, 1938 (which he helped found in 1923 and where he was president of the board of trustees, 1931-38); the honorary D.H.L. degree from the College of Jewish Studies, 1952; and the Brandeis Award for humanitarian service, 1953.

After retiring from TCCU, 1937, he was president of the New York Urban League, 1941-51; chairman of American Youth for World Youth, 1946-51; chairman of the Bureau of International Education, 1940-51; and on the board of directors of the League for Industrial Democracy.

Kilpatrick had severe critics but many more admirers and followers. His eighty-fifth birthday, November 20, 1956, celebrated at Horace Mann Auditorium, TCCU, resulted in a special March 1957 issue of Progressive Education, "William Heard Kilpatrick Eighty-Fifth Anniversary," containing 10 articles. Both heralded and criticized as John Dewey's chief educational interpreter, Kilpatrick was a leading advocate of progressive education. He died after a long illness at age 93 on February 13, 1965.

References

Kilpatrick gave to the Special Collections, Teachers College Library, Columbia University a handwritten diary (begun 1904) of over 40 volumes, scrapbooks, unpublished papers, and a two-volume typescript from taped interviews with his biographer, Samuel Tenenbaum. An oral history memoir is in the Special Collections, Butler Library, Columbia University Archives. His 14 books and 375 articles are listed in "Writings of William Heard Kilpatrick," Studies in Philosophy and Education, Vol. 1 (November 1961), pp. 220-230.

His more important books include Foundations of Method, New York: Macmillan, 1925, which expands on his project method (translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Russian); Education for a Changing Civilization, Macmillan, 1926 (translated into Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Portuguese, German, and Italian); Education and the Social Crisis, A Proposed Program, New York: Liveright, 1932; The Educational Frontier, New York: Appleton-Century, 1933, containing

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his articles and and articles by other leading progressives (he was book editor), and said to be the characteristic progressivist work of the 1930s; Group Education for a Democracy, New York: Association Press, 1940 (translated into Japanese, Korean, and Spanish); and Philosophy of Education, New York, 1951 (translated into Spanish).

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Franklin Parker